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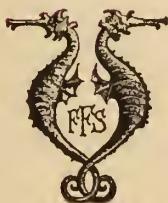


Mlle. CHARLOTTE DU VAL D'OGNES  
*The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York*

# JACQUES LOUIS DAVID AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

BY

W. R. VALENTINER



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TO  
ELEANOR AND EDSEL B. FORD



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FIG. 3. F. BOUCHER: MADAME DE POMPADOUR  
*Collection of Maurice de Rothschild, Paris*



FIG. 1. L. DAVID: MADAME DE SERVAN (1799)  
*Private Possession, New York*



FIG. 2. H. RIGAUD: GENTLEMAN PLAYING  
A BAGPIPE  
*Museum, Aix*

# JACQUES LOUIS DAVID

## AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION



It is possible that a period like the French Revolution and the era of Napoleon's tyrannous rule should witness the development of a great art? It would seem that in the domain of art fresh creative impulses are born more often in times of unrest and disturbance than in periods of political security. Those epochs in the history of art which we regard today as "golden ages" — the age of Pericles; the Renaissance at about 1500; the Holland of the day of Frans Hals and Rembrandt — were by no means peaceful years, but periods of national strife and revolutionary ideas. No happy alliance is possible between political discipline and art which springs from the free, untrammeled impulse of the individual. We need only walk through those galleries at Fontainebleau arranged by Napoleon during the days of his Empire to recognize the deadening influence exerted by an established autocracy, and feel blow coldly over us the chilly breath of an academic and court-inspired art.

On the contrary, the period of the French Revolution, and the days of Napoleon's struggle to power, which coincided with the period of David's finest achievement, witnessed so powerful an onrush of new ideas that their influence persists till the present day. Modern art had its inception in this period, and today, after a lapse of over a hundred years, is again tending in the direction first indicated by David. It is herein that the significance of his contribution lies. Helped by the influences of the revolution, he destroyed the artificial, hyper-refined art ideals of the eighteenth century, and substituted for them a sterner, simpler, more healthy and democratic art. That is not to affirm that his art was greater than the one it superseded. David was not a genius of the highest order as was Watteau, but to those of us sensitive to the forces underlying our own times, it says — or should say — more than pre-revolutionary art.

We need only to compare a portrait of David's style like the one of Madame de Servan (Fig. 1) with portraits of his predecessors (Figs. 2 and 3) in order to recognize the difference between the Rococo period and the new era, introduced by David. This portrait of Madame de

Servan, painted about 1800,<sup>1</sup> impresses one as a composition of statu-esque simplicity expressing the salient spirit of a period which was seeking fundamentally new doctrines by which to govern life. The portrait by Rigaud, the famous court painter of the reign of Louis XIV, painted in the beginning of the century, and of Boucher's portrait of Madame de Pompadour, painted in 1758, do not differ too much from another in style. In these portraits of the Rococo period the surface is filled with a restless play of short-curving lines; light and shadow are alternated perpetually at close intervals; the colors form a pleasing pattern of small variegated patches, and the costume and accessories almost eclipse the real motif — that of portraiture. In David's canvas the figure emerges clearly from a wide and empty space, and a clear, flowing line with definite horizontals and verticals has replaced the tortuous curves. It seems an extraordinary piece of daring for the artist to have composed in these broad planes with a completely empty background, when we consider the century-old tradition embodied in the older paintings. It was the French Revolution, with its rejection of old formulas which inspired this daring.

But just as the revolution, from prelude to aftermath, covered a span of some twenty years, so the artist required a similar period of time to gradually attain the classic style which we see here stamped with the authority of his fifty years.

Jacques Louis David was born in 1748 in the middle of the Louis XV period, and the school which fathered him was that of Boucher, the frank exponent of the playful and elegant school of painting fostered by the artificial social life of Paris. David's earliest known composition, "Minerva's Conquest of Mars," painted in 1771 in the artist's twenty-third year, and now in the Louvre (Fig. 4), shows Boucher's influence clearly. Here we still have the unquiet baroque line of pre-revolutionary painting — the picture is full of detail, the draperies worn by the figures flutter in the breeze like those of Boucher and the cherubs beloved of this master float in the clouds. The subject, too, is of the mythologic-allegorical character affected by the painters of the court and the aristocracy. The Goddess of Wisdom conquers the God of War! What irony when we remember that twenty years later during the revolution the painter of this picture was among those who helped let loose on France a war of twenty years' duration.

<sup>1</sup> The picture is not dated, but since the portrait of Madame de Verninac which is almost identical in composition is dated 1799, it is most likely executed shortly thereafter.



FIG. 4. MINERVA'S CONQUEST OF MARS (1771)

*Louvre, Paris*



If we look more closely we can discern an alien spirit behind the apparently suave portrayal. Despite his subject the young artist's combative vein emerges. True, Mars is overthrown, but with what ill grace he accepts his fate. It might be Danton himself, the great revolutionary, overthrown by his enemies. A face expressing such fury of despair, so spasmodically clenched a hand was never portrayed by any of the playful Rococo painters, and can we not discern something of the energetic Napoleonic spirit in Minerva's conquering pose?

David must have been of a naturally passionate and excitable temperament — possibly inherited from his father who was killed in a duel when the boy was eleven years old. As a young artist he applied for the Prix de Rome, and when he did not at once receive it from the Academy, was about to take his life in despair and was only persuaded by a friend to abandon the idea of starving himself to death after three days of fasting with that purpose in view. Later on, in extenuation of this episode, he said: "This postponement of my journey to Italy was prejudicial to my development, as I was four years too late in abandoning the bad style of the French painters." Like all reformers he believed that everything produced by the generation preceding him was bad, although today all that we can say is that it was different!

When, in 1775, he did actually set out for Rome, and his friends at parting advised him to beware the influence of the antique, he replied proudly, "Antique art cannot seduce me — it lacks fire and passion." Before long, however, he was in thrall to the classic art of Italy, and within a few years his art had undergone a complete transformation, not only in form but in subject. One of the first pictures that he sent from Italy in 1781 to be exhibited in Paris was "The Blind Belisarius," now in the Museum at Lille (a later version, painted in 1784, in the Louvre) (Fig. 5). Belisarius, once an all-powerful general of the Roman Emperor Justinian, crouches, old, blind and poor by the side of the road. The saviour of Rome and conqueror of Carthage has fallen into disgrace with a master jealous of his fame, and is reduced to beggary. A rich Roman lady, with tears in her eyes, is placing alms in the old man's helmet held out by a youth, while a passing soldier recognizes his old commander with surprise and pain. Our artist has turned his back on the cheerful Olympian themes of the allegoric-mythological school, and with this tragic subject descends to that world of sorrow and misery in which, but a few years later, he was to see his own nation engulfed. He is still preoccupied, however, with classic themes seen through the eyes

of that antiquity in which he had submerged himself. He has not yet completely achieved his individual style, and Boucher's influence is superseded by that of another French painter who represented the classic style one hundred years earlier — Poussin.

This influence lasted throughout his Italian period. Even as late as 1788 we are constantly reminded in his landscape studies of Nicolas Poussin and Claude Lorrain, as may be exemplified by the two pages from an hitherto unpublished Italian sketchbook dated 1788, reproducing views from the surroundings of Rome (Figs. 7 and 8).<sup>1</sup>

Just as the poets and orators of the revolution harked back to the classic trend of the seventeenth century — as Voltaire and even Robespierre evoked Racine and Corneille — David, too, now followed a trend of French art which has persisted from medieval times to the present day, that line of classic, simple, antiquely conceived, clearly constructed creations from which the highly developed church sculptures of the middle ages, the Renaissance paintings of the period of Francis I, and the art of Claude Lorrain and Poussin derive. Simplicity and straight lines replaced the restless, complicated curve in the composition of the Belisarius. It is not alone in the architecture, strongly influenced by the antique, that the horizontal and vertical line multiplied itself, the painter, too, sought to lend strength and rhythm to his composition by a parallelism in the gestures of his figures. The arms of Belisarius and the boy follow the same line, as do their feet, and the soldier's hands repeat the parallel gesture.

David achieved this linear coördination between figures and architecture with even greater success in his next important work, "The Oath of the Horatii," painted in 1783 and now in the Louvre (Fig. 6). The figures, divided into three groups, are posed in masterly fashion against the three arches of the architectural background — three men on the left, three female figures on the right, and the old man, holding out the three swords in the centre. The movement swings from group to group with the same rhythm that governs the curves of the arches, and is strongly

<sup>1</sup> The figure studies in this sketchbook are interesting from another point of view (compare Fig. 10, a study of a beggar closely related to the composition of the Belisarius, although later in date). They prove clearly the endeavour of David to replace by his own the eighteenth-century style of drawing as he had learned it in the Boucher school. Instead of modelling the figures through diagonal parallel lines, indicating the shadows and neglecting the outlines, he tries to produce the effect of plasticity through clearly connected outlines alone, leaving out the modelling entirely. In this respect also David is the predecessor of artists of the most modern school. He developed his style of drawing in connection with his studies after Roman sculptures and was strongly influenced in his method of designing by a young French sculptor, Lamarie, whom he met in Rome. (See Charles Saunier: *Louis David*, p. 16.)



FIG. 5. THE BLIND BELISARIUS (1781)  
*Museum, Lille*



FIG. 6. THE OATH OF THE HORATII (1784)  
*Louvre, Paris*





FIG. 7. VILLAGE OUTSIDE ROME  
From the Italian sketchbook (1788)

*Private possession, Detroit*



FIG. 8. VIEW IN ROME  
From the Italian sketchbook (1788)

*Private possession, Detroit*



emphasized by the parallel lines of limbs and draperies. We are told that the outstretched foot of the foremost youth was drawn and redrawn by David many times. It is now in exactly the right stance to determine the general linear movement and is at the same time a masterpiece of naturalistic drawing. The pose of this youth's spear has been criticised as practically impossible, but it requires precisely this continuous line to strengthen the rhythm of the outstretched legs.

The motif is again drawn from Roman history, this time via a drama by Corneille with which David was familiar. The three sons of the old Horace, who occupies the centre of the canvas, were chosen by the Romans to meet the Albans in single combat, the latter being also represented by three brothers, the Curiatii. It had been agreed that this combat should decide which race would have dominion over the other. The victory fell to the Horatii, the representatives of Rome. Two of the brothers fell in combat with the Curiatii, but the third triumphed through a ruse—turning apparently in flight and killing his three opponents one after another as they pursued him.

The trumpet call to freedom implicit in this composition must have rung in the ears of the youthful French patriots who crowded to see it, for it appeared at a moment when the soul of young France had been stirred by the American war of independence. It was painted in the year 1783 when Benjamin Franklin signed in Paris that treaty with England in which, for the first time, the independence of the American Union was recognized. Beyond the Atlantic there had come into existence a republic comparable to the Roman republic, an anti-monarchical conception whose ideals were sympathetic to the progressive thinkers of France, though France was, at the same time, the seat of Europe's oldest and most absolute monarchy. How did this message of freedom from across the ocean affect the youth of France? Our artist's ear was sensitively attuned to the ferment of radical thought. While the painters of the older school, Boucher and Fragonard, still painted their playful compositions and tried to dissemble the tragic reality, the dull rumble of the coming earthquake sounded its note in David's paintings. His themes became ever more gruesome and inflammatory. A painting in Marseilles depicts St. Roche pleading with the Madonna to succor the sick, and the foreground is filled with dead, plague-stricken bodies. Another in Valence represents the Death of Ugolino with his Sons—that horrible scene from Dante's *Divina Commedia* in which the Italian general

and his five sons die of hunger in a dungeon into which they have been thrown by his political enemies.

“The Death of Socrates,”<sup>1</sup> painted in 1787, now in private possession in Paris, enhanced David’s rapidly growing celebrity not only in France, but abroad. No less a personage than Sir Joshua Reynolds, who was then in Paris, said that he had studied the picture daily for a week, and with every inspection found it more perfect. It was, he said, “the greatest achievement since Raffael’s frescoes in the Vatican, and would have done honor to the Athenians of the Periclean age.” Today, of course, this estimate seems an exaggeration to us. The composition is assuredly well planned, and admirable in many of its aspects: the youth, who with averted face hands the poisoned cup to Socrates, and the other youth in the background beating his hands against the arch of the doorway. Some of the gestures seem theatrical, however, and individual figures, such as the athletic and uninspired Socrates, look as though they had been derived from a relief. The composition is too studied; it lacks feeling. Why is it that David’s great historical compositions are apt to leave us cold, especially those produced during a period of great spiritual and political turmoil in which his own sympathies were greatly involved? His part in the revolution amply proves the strength of the passions which might have found an outlet in his art. Why was he not the realist to dramatize those struggles like Delacroix who lived fifty years later, when revolution and world-war were over, yet who painted battles of all kinds with the most terrific naturalism. The answer lies in this very fact: Delacroix never witnessed the battle scenes he reproduced; they are the fruit of his imagination. It is impossible for a significant realistic art to develop during war and revolution. What one experiences at such times is so horrible that the imagination is stifled rather than stimulated. Only insensitive and coarse natures are capable of painting scenes of horror through which they have lived. When, and as now in our days, reality weighs all too heavily upon us, art, in self defense, becomes abstract and withdraws itself from reality. It is for this reason that the art of the revolution, David’s art, was stylized and cool: the artist perforce took refuge from the horrors of reality in the kingdom of his imagination. His art, like the poetry and oratory of the day, was idealistic in trend. When Robespierre delivered those terrible speeches that sent so many human beings to the guillotine, he spoke slowly, rhythmically, in artfully rounded phrases, as though he were holding an

<sup>1</sup> Illustrated in the excellent biography of David by Léon Rosenthal in the series: *Les Maitres de l’Art*, p. 30.



FIG. 9. PEN SKETCH OF MARIE ANTOINETTE  
Made from the artist's window as the tumbril halted  
on the way to the scaffold (1793)  
*Collection of Edmond de Rothschild, Paris*



FIG. 10. STUDY FROM THE ITALIAN SKETCHBOOK (1788)  
*Private possession, Detroit*



academic discussion. That the great revolutionaries, among whom we must number David, thought idealistically rather than realistically, is proved conclusively by their manner of expressing themselves. Like all fanatics they lived in a world of dreams and believed their ideas—which seemed to them so splendid—to be either already realized or on the verge of realization. They believed only one last great effort to be necessary, to achieve—though at the cost of human lives—the freedom of humanity as a whole. This alone can explain why revolutionaries who pursued their ends through rivers of blood, seem at times inspired with a noble and unexpected humanitarianism; why they were nearly all tender and devoted men in their private family life. Danton idolized his wife and children, the letters of Camille Desmoulins to his bride are beautiful and touching, and Robespierre, the solitary, the incorruptible, whose private life was beyond criticism, was a great lover of nature, who brought, we are told, bunches of wild flowers home with him from his long walks.

With the portrayal of Brutus (now in the Louvre), who, because of his profound respect for justice permitted the execution of his sons, we find ourselves on the threshold of the revolution. Brutus, with stern, dark countenance, is seated before the Goddess of Justice, while behind him the bodies of his sons are borne across the scene and the grieving mother and sisters cling together in the pillared hall of their dwelling.

While today we feel the construction of this picture to be far too studied, and are inclined to dub it academic, David's intention was directed precisely against the then accepted traditional formulas. Whoever dreamed, said contemporary criticism, of placing the principal figure in the shadow or planning a composition without regard to the triangular construction? David left the centre of the canvas purposely free. Our eyes fall first on a column, a chair, a still life arrangement on a table, frankly at the expense of the composition's unity. The incidentals were drawn with extraordinary care. In order to assure the accuracy of the classic furnishings, David had the cabinet maker, Jacob, make the pieces for him after his own designs. The painting created such an extraordinary sensation that not only did it give the first impetus to the Parisian vogue for classic furniture, but women's fashions were definitely influenced by the loosely coifed hair and long flowing garments of the feminine figures. Not the least significant part of David's contribution to art is the influence he exerted on the decorative arts and on fashion. It is very rare that the influence of a single artist's

work on a bygone style can be so clearly measured as in the case of David, from whose art the decorative art of the Empire period derived.

Only an artist who is much in the public eye can sway styles, and David became one of the heroes of the day when this composition was exhibited in the Salon of 1789—the year whose autumn was to see the outbreak of the revolution. Perhaps no other picture has ever played so great a rôle in the political and social life of a nation as this work, which is by no means its author's finest production, much less among the finest of art history. All of which goes to prove how unreliable popular taste is when it comes to a question of contemporary art.

It was of course the subject which evoked such enormous acclaim, for the very name of Brutus was one to conjure with where the radical youth of Paris was concerned. Wherever speeches on the new political conceptions were made there was mention of the name of Rome's deliverer from the yoke of Caesar, and from Mirabeau to Danton the people loved to connect the name of Brutus with their heroes. Even the opponents of the revolution believed themselves to be inspired by him. When Charlotte Corday murdered David's friend Marat, she declared in prison that she hoped to meet Brutus in Elysium. This veneration for antiquity, which was characteristic of the revolutionary period, was greatly fostered by David's classical compositions.

The narrative of the German writer Halem,<sup>1</sup> who visited Paris the first year of the revolution, and attended some theatrical presentations, tells us vividly how familiar the populace was with David's painting. He attended a performance of the "Brutus" of Voltaire, at the National Theater, and relates that although he got to the Box Office at five o'clock in the afternoon, he had the utmost difficulty in obtaining a seat. He writes, "Mirabeau stood near me at the ticket office and because of his celebrity was given a place in the fourth balcony. I followed him through the crowd as best I could and managed to get a chair in a rented loge. Mirabeau's entrance was received with thunderous applause and cries of 'To the gallery, Mirabeau.' As he did not respond a deputation waited on him, the spokesman saying, 'The French nation demands its Brutus.' He had to give in, and was borne away to be received in the gallery with rapturous applause. What a triumph when later Valerius' words to Brutus,

'On you alone all eyes here are turned,

'You who broke our chains and gave us the gift of freedom,'

<sup>1</sup> *Briefe aus der französischen Revolution*, edited by G. Landauer, 1922.



FIG. 11. MICHEL GÉRARD AND HIS FAMILY (1789)  
*Museum, Le Mans*



were addressed pointedly to him. At the end of the play I was amazed to see David's painting of Brutus reproduced on the stage. In speaking Brutus' last words with which the play closes :

'Rome now is free. That is enough.

The gods be thanked,'

Vanhove, the leading actor, assumed the pose of David's Brutus, and the bodies of his sons were borne across the back of the stage. Every Parisian knows David's picture. Everyone instantly recognized the intention of publicly honoring the artist through this presentation, and general applause heightened the celebration." So reads the narrative.

What had happened? Why this enthusiasm of crowd and intellectuals for a new day? Why these celebrations within celebrations? Even today, almost one hundred and fifty years later, the words "French Revolution" rouse our blood, literature is divided into opposing camps by which either the revolution or the monarchy is condemned, and there are many who hold in abhorrence the events of those days and the theories that brought them into being and believe that the awful bath of blood might have been avoided — as though revolutions were the work of men and not natural occurrences like tidal waves that the individual can neither bring into being nor arrest in their course. In the history of the human race we see again and again how one social stratum after another climbs up, pushing aside the one that preceded it. When, as in France, a monarchy and aristocracy has been in power long enough to weaken in its rule because security and luxury have undermined its morale and its strength, another stratum, scenting this weakness, seeks to wrest to itself this power which its fresh and undrained life force fits it more ably to use. In France this social stratum was the Bourgeoisie, the Third Estate, which from the beginning of the new era — the sixteenth century — had grown strong commercially and illustrious in art and literature, but had not yet achieved any political rights.

The nobility, however, preferred to die rather than allow the power which they had held for hundreds of years to pass from their hands — quite naturally, for the function of government is their only element. So came the unequal battle in which from the beginning the victory was to the young and powerful stratum. To the ruling class form alone was left, while the class which aspired to rule possessed passion. Like all young, unpractised and fanatical fighters, their representatives shot far beyond their goal, and because, though victors, they were still unpractised in the use of power, they abused it, destroyed senselessly whatever

still lived of the old régime, and then turned upon each other until the strongest pushed the others aside and became supreme. These strongest among the strong were successively the leaders of the Constituent and Legislative Assemblies: first Mirabeau, later the so-called Terrorists, among them Danton, Robespierre and Marat, and finally Napoleon.

The democratic idea was victorious in the French Revolution despite Napoleon, who, at first, embodied this idea in himself, and whose Empire was only the short reaction which follows all new experiments. Its consequences have persisted to our own day, when as the revolution's final result one monarchy after another in the European scene has gone into eclipse.

If we would be just we must admit that during the revolution there were heroes on both sides, among the monarchists as well as the revolutionaries. Among the monarchists — to name a few of the more notable — were the King, the Queen and Charlotte Corday. On the revolutionary side we can muster practically all of the leaders, who sooner or later almost all perished on the scaffold for their principles, and we can familiarize ourselves with these men through David's portraits.

The outward events of the beginning of the revolution are well known. The financial difficulties of the Government compelled the King and his Advisors to convene the States General, which had not met for generations. The elections of the deputies had already roused popular passion, and when the Government, after the Assembly had convened, endeavored to establish the old order in which all the power was vested in the upper classes and the Third Estate had none, revolt broke loose. Under Mirabeau's leadership the representatives of the Third Estate left the Assembly, and met, for lack of other quarters, in the Jeu de Paume (the Tennis Court), where they took oath not to dissolve until they had established a new constitution. This "Oath of the Tennis Court" was immortalized by David in a famous composition of which only sketches by David and paintings after his cartoon by other artists have been preserved.<sup>1</sup>

It was a year later, when the Revolutionary Assembly had established its power, that it recalled that great day of the beginning of the revolution and commissioned David to paint the picture. It is again the German poet Halem, who describes the circumstances for us, in a letter written by him after a visit to the Jacobin Club. He writes: "After con-

<sup>1</sup> Reproduced in Charles Saunier, *David*, p. 44 and 48.



FIG. 12. PORTRAIT OF BARÈRE (1793)  
*Palais, Versailles*



tinued speechifying, Dubois de Crancé, a member of the National Assembly, rose and recalled to the memory of those present that day on June 20th of the preceding year, when six hundred harried and unarmed Deputies, surrounded, as he put it, 'by the Oriental pomp and the bayonets of despotism,' laid the cornerstone of French freedom by the well-known oath of the tennis court at Versailles. Never could he recall this event, said he, without his heart beating faster, without a glow of patriotic feeling. He proposed the formulation of an address to the assembly in which they should be asked to sanction (1.) That the tennis court, grave of despotism and cradle of freedom, be declared a national monument, closed, and dedicated to stillness... (2.) That the wonderful moment of this first oath be perpetuated by a painting 120' high and 30' wide, painted by the greatest of the French masters, and hung in the National Convention. 'I say,' he continued, 'by the greatest of the masters, and to whom else could I refer than to him who so nobly depicted Brutus and the Oath of the Horatii?' The vaulted hall rang with loud cries of assent. David the painter was present. Everyone turned toward him, and pale with enthusiasm the young man stepped to the orator's platform and thanked the Assembly in trembling tones for its trust, which he hoped from his heart to adequately repay, adding touchingly, 'Sleep will not visit me for many a night.'

"Then ensued a noble rivalry. Abbé Dillon arose first to vindicate his right to appear in the picture among those taking the oath. He was one of the few clerics who had belonged to the National Assembly before the day of the Oath. At that moment he had been obliged to take charge of the unimportant clerical archives, and consequently had not been present. He called the members present to witness and his claim was admitted. Then arose the Comte de Noailles to voice his approval of commemorating the Oath of those brave citizens. 'But, alas,' said he, 'the former aristocracy sees itself excluded and how many of us echoed that oath in our hearts. If only the painter could depict us standing in the distance with yearning hearts and the burning wish that we might be among the celebrants of the Oath.' A third stood up and expressed the wish that the suppliants might be included in the picture. A fourth demanded that those wretches who had been present at the Oath, but who had later fallen for the good cause be not included. A fifth got up and related a story of Bailly who after fruitless efforts to calm the mob around the tennis court, stepped out and commanded silence *in the name of the National Assembly*. This decision, this command, the name

of the National Assembly then spoken openly to the people for the first time, had a great effect, had quieted the mob and perhaps determined its future mood. The orator asked the painter if he could make use of this incident in his composition. The painter stepped once more to the platform and thanked them all for their remarks, begging them to remember, however, that the picture must have both unity and historical accuracy. He was generally applauded. Mirabeau then took the floor and with marvellous adroitness conceded full despotic power to genius such as that of the artist David, and proposed that Dubois de Crancé prepare a written petition for the National Assembly. Dubois made the excuse that he was about to leave for the country and cries of 'Mirabeau! Mirabeau!' resounded. Mirabeau understood the call and accepted the formulation of the address. He read it at one of the next sittings and the master's hand was recognized." So much for the account of the eyewitness.

David exhibited the cartoon for "The Oath of the Tennis Court" in the Salon of 1791 and on Barère's proposal the National Assembly voted that the painting be carried out at the cost of the State and be hung in the National Convention as an incentive to zeal. In the Catalogue of the Exhibition David had stated that it was not his intention to make likenesses of the members of the National Assembly. How easily, nevertheless, the Parisian public recognized the various personalities and what a sensation the composition made is proved by the fact that Barère practically became a personage through the fact that David portrayed him writing, in the left foreground, near the principal group—placing on paper for posterity the tale of the great event. Barère's not too inspired journal, *Point du Jour*, became from that moment a much sought-after sheet.

Despite the many characteristic types, David's composition "The Oath of the Tennis Court" is essentially in the monumental style in which quite justly details are subordinated to the spirit of the whole. The thronging crowd stands out against the bare walls of the Tennis Court, in a clearly defined linear pattern, built up by the myriad outstretched hands. The figures are all filled with a mighty dramatic force. Bailly, the president, in the centre, stands like a statue of bronze. For the first time David shook himself free of historical subjects, depicted a contemporary event and proved himself well able to adapt his idealistic style to such a theme. In this simplified idiom he attained the expression of a dignified, rhetorical passion which he was unable to encompass to a

FIG. 13. LAVOISIER AND HIS WIFE (1787)

*Private Collection, New York*



FIG. 14. MME DE RICARD AND HER SON (c. 1800)

*Collection of Mr. Edward J. Berwind, New York*







FIG. 16. MARAT

(Drawing)

Study for the painting in Brussels

FIG. 17. DANTON  
(From drawing in the Museum, Lille)



FIG. 15. LE PELLETIER  
(From the engraving in the Louvre)



like degree in his historical subjects, and the lofty idealism of the composition speaks well for the sincerity and intensity of his convictions.

The radical Jacobin Club, whose members had pledged themselves so enthusiastically to the promotion of his art, became thereafter one of his favorite haunts. Because, as an artist, he was not particularly judicious politically he allowed himself to be influenced by the extremists whose biting logic is often more compelling to temperamental laymen than are more moderate councils. David had, as his whole career clearly proves, a rarely fine instinct for the elementary forces in political and social life, and those to whom he now turned, the representatives of the "Mountain"—to whom Marat, Danton and Robespierre belonged—were as a matter of fact the strongest personalities on whom leadership was soon to devolve. Thanks to them he was elected to the National Assembly in 1792. He never assumed any leading part, for a defect in his speech interfered with his public speaking, but he often gave vent to his enthusiasm only by loud cries of assent.

For the rest his contribution lay in the field of art. He busied himself with cartoons for monumental paintings, with monuments, with arranging national festivals, sketching classical costumes for all the functionaries, and in organizing the artist world, always, we must admit, from an idealistic standpoint. He has been much criticised for the fact that he concurred in the King's execution, and later in Danton's. In the condemnation of the King, however, he followed his party; in Danton's case his reasons were personal.

The principal oration against the King at his trial in 1793 was made by Barère, the lawyer, who advocated David's composition to the National Assembly, and whom David later immortalized as historiographer in his work. David painted a masterly portrait of him delivering the Impeachment of Louis XVI (Fig. 12). In the composition which lies before him on the parapet is written the beginning of the famous speech which ends with the words, "The Tree of Liberty could not grow were it not watered with the blood of Kings." Barère, good-looking and a clever orator, was not among the nobler of the revolutionaries. He belongs to that very small group of revolutionary leaders who did not themselves become sacrifices, but outlived the revolution in all its phases and held public office even in the times of reaction under Napoleon and the Bourbons. The Abbe Sieyès was another of this group. He was from the very first a representative of the Third Estate and achieved some reputation under Napoleon. David, too, whose art safeguarded him

among the dangers of the revolution, belongs to them. Both Sieyès, whose clerical frock was his protection, and David were helped by the fact that they knew how to stand aloof. Barère, however, was the type of politician who trims his sails to meet the wind and uses his sagacity to judge not where right but where might is and then diplomatically allies himself to it in order to always be in the vanguard of events. His accusations against the King only expressed the general feeling of the people whom he strove to please.

True, this general sentiment would not have been possible had not the monarchy for years been its own worst enemy and made of itself a laughing stock. There is, indeed, no excuse for political murder. The King merited the guillotine as little as did thousands of others on both sides who were sacrificed to it on account of their political opinions. That Louis XVI was arraigned before a tribunal of his people, however, was in part at least the fault of the monarchy itself. This particular King possessed very few of those qualities which a nation expects from its sovereign. It is one of Fate's most remarkable ironies that Louis XVI had every desire to be democratic — but his manner of so being was unfortunate to a degree. The story runs that as nineteen year old Dauphin he used to pursue the servants laden with soiled laundry in order to tickle them under the arms, and as King the blacksmith's hammer and anvil were his favorite diversions. The young and charming Marie Antoinette found it hard to accustom herself to a clumsy husband with soiled hands who emerged red-faced from his smithy and approached her affectionately. It happened that did the King espy from a window masons working in the courtyard below he would run down with rolled-up sleeves to assist them. There is a certain kind of good nature that is inappropriate to Princes. His portraits show him as having a clumsy, phlegmatic figure and plain, not too intelligent features. A typical representative of a doomed caste, he lacked any energy to stem misfortune, any originality or appreciation of the new conceptions of the day. It seems as though a curse rests on people of this type, that everything they do tends only to make their situation worse, as though they help to bring about their own destruction. What weakness when in the hour of the greatest danger Louis writes to his brother, the Comte d'Artois: "I have revoked the orders that I gave. My troops will abandon Paris, and I will use more gentle means. Don't speak to me of a Coup d'État, a display of force. I feel it is wiser to wait for the storm to abate, and to expect everything from time, from the awakening of right-thinking people and the love

FIG. 18. MADAME SERIZIAT AND SON (1795)

*Louvre, Paris*



FIG. 19. MONSIEUR SERIZIAT (1795)

*Louvre, Paris*





of the French nation for their King." Ideas of this kind never arrested a revolution! It was fortunate for him that his phlegmatic temperament could find refuge in prayer. This quality helped him to meet death with resolution but was of small service to the caste he represented. The times were too violent for Christian temperaments such as the King's. Once when David received a commission for a portrayal of Christ, and his patron remarked subsequently that the figure looked more like Cato, David's reply was: "The times are not favorable for Christendom."

The King, however, continued to rely on the love of the French for their monarch. As a matter of fact this sentiment was centuries old and had persisted until the early years of his reign, but the aristocracy had helped by derision and calumny to destroy all veneration for the monarchy, poets and writers sowed doubts as to the efficacy of this form of government, and the nation began to lose its age-old respect as the King's weaknesses became apparent. It is common prejudice that Princes on account of their eminent position should be different and more distinguished than the common run of mortals, although history proves that notable personalities are as rare on the throne as in other walks of life. If a ruler is gifted, he can allow himself to come into contact with his people, if, as in most cases, he is not, he is better advised to allow himself to be admired from afar. Louis XVI, however, did just the opposite. We know what undignified scenes took place when the mob on several occasions penetrated the palace. An innkeeper stepped up to the King and spoke to him saying, after the King's reply, "You did well to give me a civil answer, otherwise I'd have made you headwaiter in my inn tomorrow." If the King had given this rascal the blow in the face he deserved, he might have been spared his long martyrdom with the scaffold at the end. Instead, however, he went up to another ruffian who had thrust a red cap on his head, and who seemed to be stumbling drunkenly against a door and helped him to open it. Even on the scaffold he wanted to help the executioner cut off his hair. The cool fashion in which he went to meet his doom, at least, merits our admiration. An American historian has fittingly remarked: "The unruffled dignity with which he met death was the finest act of his reign."

Posterity has devoted much sympathy to Marie Antoinette whose portraits by Vigée LeBrun (Fig. 25) and other court painters are familiar to all art lovers. Although she, too, was by no means an outstanding ruler her life is particularly rich in human and touching incidents. Her

very weaknesses are those which arouse one's sympathy. Who could blame the young Princess, brought to Paris from Vienna at the age of fifteen, that she remained in tutelage to her mother and sought her advice? But this very relationship which resulted when misfortune overtook her, in an appeal for help to the foreign courts, brought about her downfall. Who can fail to understand that the lovely and vivacious Marie Antoinette, surrounded by the pleasure-loving society of Paris, and tied to a dull husband to whom, nevertheless, she remained faithful, should have looked about her for congenial friends. It was this, however, that gave rise in court circles to those calumnies which so injured her reputation among her subjects and finally ruined her — calumnies founded only on gossip, not on facts. Who could blame her for finding burdensome the exaggerated etiquette of the French court, the public dinner of the King and Queen once a week, the ridiculous ceremonies of the lever, the crowd which attended even the birth of her children. And why should this inexperienced Queen have been held answerable for extravagant expenditures for gowns and festivities when her predecessors had spent just as much and the money was always given with the King's approval? Her only faults were inexperience and lack of caution. Unfortunately, when her husband proved himself unfit, she essayed, to her undoing, to take the political reins in her own hands. In her endeavour to save herself and her family she allowed her feminine sympathies and antipathies to influence her politically and so made matters worse. The price she paid for her mistakes was terrific. In all the history of royalty there is hardly a more terrible plunge from the pinnacle of power and wealth to the depths of misery.

Art and culture never bloomed more luxuriantly in France than in the early years of Marie Antoinette's reign.<sup>1</sup> The most exquisite taste pervaded the mode and was displayed at court functions; the furniture, ornaments, bronzes and porcelains designed for Marie Antoinette are among the most delightful productions of French decorative art; the great French painters of the Rococo period — Boucher, Fragonard and Hubert Robert — were still alive, as well as the sculptors Houdon, Falconet and Clodion. It was natural that the young Queen should have preferred this art to David's with its cold, stern quality and sombre, tragic motifs; that she ignored revolutionary literature, preferring to amuse herself with charming Italian operas or the music of Gluck which she introduced to France.

<sup>1</sup> The best book on the subject is by Pierre de Nolhac, *La Reine Marie Antoinette*, Paris.

That all this splendour collapsed suddenly with the revolution was not the most serious thing that faced the Queen — misfortune pursued her into her most intimate family life. She, who loved her children above all else and who, when the gathering disasters grew closer and closer to her husband, saw the collapse of one pillar after another of her very existence. Her youngest child died in his eleventh month. The Dauphin, a gifted and charming lad of seven, sickened. How could the mother who lay sobbing across the death-bed of her son at Meudon worry over the gathering storms in Paris through which pealed the knell announcing the Dauphin's death? Then came the days when the mob hung threateningly around the palace and forced her to leave Versailles for Paris in its triumphant train. When the populace stormed the Tuilleries and she feared for the fate of her other children how deeply offended was the dignity which she possessed in the same measure that the King lacked it. When the Royal family were brought back from their unlucky flight to Varennes amid the abuse and insults of the mob, the King accepted it all with his usual calm and even tried to converse with his followers. The Queen, on the contrary, suffered so horribly under the humiliation that her hair turned white over night. This, however, was but the beginning. Then came the parting with the King who was led to the scaffold (January 21, 1793); there was the even more painful parting with her children, and the torture of almost a year in prison without news of them, within sight of the bloody heads which, like that of her friend the Princesse de Lamballe, were carried past her window on pikes. When she was haled before the Tribunal, where she made answer calmly to all accusations, she was but a shadow of herself.

David made a drawing of her on her way to the scaffold (October 16, 1793) — a horrifying sketch (Fig. 9). Does there perhaps speak from it the injured vanity of an artist whose work had once been ignored by this former Queen? What a study in contrasts! This was she who only a few years previously had been the lovely model for the most charming portrait of the court painters.

Marie Antoinette was executed during the “reign of terror,” so-called, the sanguinary and precarious years 1793-94. Following the results of the revolution and its excesses all Europe had combined against France, and only the utmost concentration of internal forces made victory against such a coalition possible. The National Convention placed the direction of affairs in the hands of a committee of nine, among whom were Danton, Robespierre, Marat and St. Just, and this

Committee saved France. They formed and sent into the field the volunteer armies which, at first unorganized, gradually obtained ascendancy over the experienced coalition troops and finally drove them from the field. Everything that might work injury to the troops at the front was ruthlessly put aside. Hundreds of aristocrats followed the King and Queen to the scaffold. Murder was the order of the day and thinned out not only the friends of the old régime, but also the ranks of the revolutionaries themselves. The earliest of these to fall in connection with the King's execution was Le Pelletier, formerly the Conte de St. Fargeau, a member of the Convention, who was murdered by a member of the King's body-guard on the eve of the execution of the King, on January 20, 1793, because he had voted for the King's death. Busts of Le Pelletier and Brutus were placed in the Palace of Justice, and David quickly completed a fine painting of the victim which he offered to the Convention in the following terms: "Fellow Citizens, each one of us is responsible to the Fatherland for those gifts which nature has bestowed on us; diverse though their expression may be, the goal is the same for us all. Every true patriot should use every means to inspire his fellow citizens and bring before them at all times the great examples of heroism and virtue. I am moved by these thoughts in offering to the National Convention the painting of Michel Le Pelletier who was murdered in cowardly fashion because he voted for a tyrant's death."

Unfortunately this painting has been lost. Le Pelletier's descendants, into whose possession it passed, were Royalists, and hid the painting, destroying the plates and all the engravings which had been made from it. The reproduction (Fig. 15) was made from the only existing impression in the Cabinet of Engravings in the Louvre. The composition is conceived in the grand and austere manner which characterized David's work in these days of terror and fanatically exaggerated idealism.

Before six months were up another assassination, this time of one of the leaders of the revolution — Marat — roused the members of the Convention and the populace to the utmost. Hardly had the news spread abroad before one of the members of the Convention arose crying: "Where art thou, David? You made a portrait of Le Pelletier for posterity when he died for his country, now the occasion has arisen for another work." "This too I will do," David answered, and produced one of his most moving compositions (Figs. 16 and 20). It is planned with great power and simplicity, and filled with deep and tragic feeling, for Marat was his friend. Nothing has aroused more astonishment than this



FIG. 20. MARAT (1793)

*Museum, Brussels*



friendship of David's for Marat who has been regarded as the blood-thirsty instigator of the horrors and deviltries of the revolution. If we look into the matter more closely, however, we must recognize in Marat qualities which explain the esteem of men like David. He had remarkable philosophic and scientific gifts. While his enemies described him as a quack doctor, or, as Carlisle erroneously states, a veterinary, as a matter of fact his professional contributions as an oculist were so remarkable that some of his writings have been reprinted even of late years. Before the revolution he was the most celebrated oculist of the aristocracy, and the Comte d'Artois, later Charles X, had appointed him as his personal physician at a salary of two thousand pounds. His philosophical writings, such as the three volume *Essays on Man* which appeared in English and French, achieved a reputation for him abroad. Although he did not become a member of the French Academy, on account of his disagreement with Voltaire and his attack on Newton, no less a person than Goethe expressed himself concerning this injustice. Benjamin Franklin, too, was among those who visited Marat and were interested in his experiments in physics.

On the outbreak of the revolution he abandoned his career as doctor and scholar to develop an astonishing public zeal founded on his passion for the new ideas. He influenced the development of the new forms of government in no small measure, advised against copying the English constitution with which he had familiarized himself during a stay in England, and opposed all who attempted to assume Dictatorship, even Mirabeau, then Lafayette and later General Dumouriez, whose treason he foresaw before Dumouriez went over to the Austrians and the Girondists. He voted for the condemnation of the King, whom he accused of treason to his country, but advised against his condemnation for events which happened prior to the revolution. That he was not so bloodthirsty as his opponents would have us believe is proved by his insistence that Malesherbes, the king's advisor, should not be condemned with him as he was "a wise and venerable old man."

How many of the wild imprecations which were published against his enemies, and particularly against the nobility in his journal *L'Ami du Peuple* may be laid at his door, is a question. This paper was suppressed at various times, and while Marat was in hiding it appeared with distorted versions of his opinions given out by his enemies or supposed friends, in the endeavour to bring discredit on him. The really established facts concerning him place him in no unfavorable light. He op-

posed the Girondists because he opposed a foreign war, from which he felt not only the Monarchists but those Radicals who worked in the dark like the Girondists hoped to draw advantage, and which he felt might result in the establishment of a military dictatorship. He foresaw the September murders, and demanded the establishment of a tribunal for the prisoners. This was not done, and the murders consequently took place.

True his impassioned pen evoked death and destruction upon his opponents, but he was persecuted all his life and his enemies retaliated in kind. More than once he fled from death, hiding for weeks at a time in cellars and in sewers and contracting from lack of nourishment all sorts of bodily ills which his iron energy enabled him to disregard. Ill, unable to attend the Convention, although working all day long, he sought relief in hot baths where he wrote by placing a board across the bath for his books and papers. With, in any case, but a short time to live, he fell victim to the murderer's knife in the hands of an eccentric and talented young noblewoman, Charlotte Corday, who hoped to end the revolution by murdering Marat, whereas her deed had exactly the opposite effect. She belonged to the Girondist circles whose persecution followed the outbreak of the war and whose suppression Marat demanded when at first victory seemed doubtful.

Marat was unquestionably a true friend of the people and his published and spoken convictions were utterly sincere. In spite of his powerful and completely independent position, for he was affiliated with no particular party, he rejected every salaried position, every political distinction and lived in the poorest circumstances, the very bathtub which he used and which later attained a sort of celebrity as a curiosity being borrowed from a neighbor. He received petitioners without number, and endeavoured in the "Letterbox" of his paper, which he was the first to introduce, to answer the countless questions put by the people. Charlotte Corday only obtained an interview with him after several unsuccessful attempts, by pretending that she was seeking help for a widow with five children. The paper which Marat holds in his hand in David's picture was sent in by her to obtain admission, and not without reason or effect has the artist made these words legible: "13 July, 1793, Charlotte Corday to Citizen Marat." "To be unfortunate is to be sure of your assistance." An order for 25 francs which Marat had made out for the widow in whose name Charlotte Corday sought his aid lies on the stool in the foreground. Her dagger seems to have found him while he affixed his signature to it.

This composition is among David's finest achievements in its combination of very simple forms and great expressiveness. We almost feel the corpse still lives, still breathes. The most touching naturalness is combined with a truly heroic style comparable to that of France's great tragic poets, such as Racine and Corneille. If we remember that at the time this picture was painted, the elegant Rococo painters were still producing their piquant compositions, we recognize that in art as in life a new era had dawned, an art founded on entirely new conceptions, which built its compositions with large and massive forms and sought again those depths of inspiration which had entirely disappeared from the art of the court painters.

David painted still another composition as propaganda for his political ideals. A thirteen-year-old drummer boy, Joseph Bara, fell in the battles in the Vendee in December, 1793, and David was commissioned by the Convention to immortalize the death of this young hero of the Republic. This painting, now in the Museum at Avignon, although unfinished, and very simple in conception, has many charming qualities. French writers have particularly praised the purity and elegance of the drawing and the beauty of the youthful form; and in fact the swelling rhythmic line and vivacity of the bodily forms are very pleasing. If, however, we analyse the essentially novel quality in this art, it lies in the reduction of the composition to its bare essentials, combined with a deepened expressiveness. The scene of the battle in which the boy fell is only lightly indicated. In the background are clouds which might be cannon smoke, and far to one side the disappearing form of a standard bearer. The boy presses the republican cockade to his breast with one hand — there is no other indication of the day's realities — everything else is universal, idealistic. The nakedness, the boy's idealized features, the wide empty spaces of the background with its suggestion of a hill — everything is concentrated on the suffering and inspiration which speak from the lines of the body. The moment of transition from life to death — which to be sure the friends of the revolution had ample chance of observing — is wonderfully depicted. We feel the trembling of the body, the lift of the breast, the stiffening of the mouth and of the half-closed eyes. The curious color scheme of the painting, the thin sulphur yellow background, the pale blue shadows in the figure, the luxuriant dark brown hair and the brightly colored cockade — contrive a curious effect.

Close bonds of friendship united David to Danton and Robespierre, the two other leaders of the Reign of Terror, as well as to Marat — al-

though this applies only to the early days where Danton is concerned. The break with him is one of the episodes in the painter's life which is most difficult to explain although David can hardly have been alone to blame, for Danton's violent nature was prone in moments of passion to transform friends into foes. It is unfortunate, however, that David did not exhibit more independence in his political opinions, and that even though he allowed himself to be dragged in Robespierre's train, he helped in the downfall of this most stirring of the revolutionary heroes.

The varying attitudes of revolutionary critics make it even harder to evaluate Danton's personality and contribution than that of Marat. Unlike Marat he was no knight of the pen, but a man of words and deeds, living fiercely in the passions of the moment, and always at his best in the times of greatest difficulty.

The personal documents which give us intimate glimpses of the personalities of the other revolutionary leaders are entirely lacking in Danton's case. He was too impulsive for this form of expression, or, in his leisure moments, too lazy. His portraits give one an impression of the strength and softness, obstinacy and good nature, energy and procrastination, which characterized this hero of the revolution whose dramatic fate has been the inspiration of many a poet. His career was short but glorious. He rose like a meteor from the obscurity of a provincial law practice to a dominating position, and during the years 1792 to 1794 his powerful figure was in the foreground and associated with every important event. His opponents accused him of cruelty and dishonesty. It is undeniable that he occasionally indulged his wild impulse to destroy those that opposed him, as witness his speech, "Revolutions cannot be carried out on tea." Although the September murders occurred during his day, his guilt lies rather in not preventing them, than in any instigation of them. He was occupied at that time with the formation of the volunteer army, and the monument erected to his memory by the City of Paris in the eighties, which depicts him inspiring the citizens with flaming words to departure for the tottering front, was well deserved. Whatever the faults of his stormy and excitable nature, he did more than any other to save his country in a moment of grave danger. So far as his dishonesty is concerned, he seems now and then to have dealt not all too accurately with State and private property, but his patriotism was none the less sincere. We must remember that not all active natures can live on nothing, like Marat and Robespierre, and that a powerful physical constitution demands other recreations. Danton had



FIG. 21. SR. JUST (1792)  
*Private possession, Paris*



FIG. 22. SELF PORTRAIT (1794)  
*Louvre, Paris*



far more love of life than the dry Robespierre, and liked to be surrounded by his men and women friends. He finally, to the horror of some historians, acquired a small country property where he hoped, his labours over, to retire with wife and children, an ambition destined never to be fulfilled.

There is in the Museum at Troyes a portrait by David of Danton's first wife,<sup>1</sup> the brave Gabrielle, a healthy, capable and intelligent housewife with black eyes and rosy cheeks—a true type of the new Bourgeoisie. She seems to have been as cheerful as she was kind, and gave Danton several children to whom he was tenderly attached. She was destined not to see his downfall. When in February, 1793, he returned from the Belgian front, he found that his wife had died and been buried several days previously. It is characteristic both of his love for her and his untamed nature that seven days after her death he had both grave and coffin opened up, embraced the corpse and commissioned a sculptor friend to make a death mask and a bust of her. His friends had great difficulty in saving him from an emotional breakdown. Even the cool Robespierre sought to comfort him in the most feeling manner in a letter in which he pledges him his devotion and friendship unto death. How quickly and how passionately they lived, these revolutionaries! A couple of months later Danton married a sixteen-year-old girl, and a year after that, Robespierre, who had promised—and undoubtedly with sincere conviction—to be true to him till death, brought him to the guillotine.

The dual rule of two temperaments so opposed as Danton's and Robespierre's could not endure for long. One cannot conceive a greater contrast than that between the robust Danton, who loudly proclaimed his every thought and the elegant frail Robespierre who was all self-control and deliberation.

How clever and calculating an actor Robespierre was is shown by the account of his attempted murder by a young girl after the manner of Marat's. The attempt failed. The crowd surged up the stairs to his room to congratulate him. Robespierre was seated in a corner calmly peeling an orange. Without a word he looked sternly at the intruding crowd, till in embarrassment they crept away. In his place Danton undoubtedly would have launched into an impassioned speech of thanks.

Robespierre and his friend St. Just (Fig. 21) are both men of pleasing appearance—almost good-looking as compared to Danton's ugly bull-

<sup>1</sup> Reproduced in the book on Danton by Louis Madelin (Paris, 1914). The following pages are based upon this excellent biography.

dog countenance. They were, especially Robespierre, who wore a wig and sword to the last, neat and even elegant in their dress, which differed sharply from Danton's almost gypsy-like effect.

Unfortunately the "Titan"—so accustomed was he to towering above his opponents in the Convention and pelting them with his Shakespearian witticisms—underestimated his puny but quick-witted and accurate opponent, Robespierre, and before he realized it, he had met his doom. Just as Danton was about to mitigate the rigours of the Convention's procedure, just as he hoped to take things a bit more easily personally, came his impeachment—plotted so subtly by Robespierre and his helper St. Just that there was no escape. So desperate a fight did the giant put up, however, for himself and his friends that it hung by a thread that his accusers might find themselves ruined in his stead. After a number of most dubious witnesses had testified against Danton, St. Just felt it wiser to deny him all defence by having the Court decide that anyone who conducted himself so offensively toward his judges as Danton, could be condemned without further hearing. Danton's mere presence was enough to dismay the jury, who, moreover, were not really convinced of his guilt. When they retired, a rumor went about that he had been acquitted. His accusers, thereupon, rushed to the jury room and forced the rebellious members to submission. It is here that our artist, who was a devoted admirer of Robespierre, appears in no favorable light. He pressed about the jury with other members of the Convention, and the report runs, called out to those who were still hesitating, "Do you still believe Danton innocent? Has he not already been judged by public opinion? Only cowards could so conduct themselves!" What a fine argument!! One member of the jury burst into sobs, and, as he could not bring himself to vote for Danton's impeachment, he was asked: "Who is more useful to the Republic, Robespierre or Danton?" "Robespierre," replied the juryman sobbing. "Then Danton must go to the guillotine," was the response.

Then came the day of the execution with its procession of three wagons, each bearing five or six condemned prisoners, and towering above them all, Danton looking proudly over the heads of the throng. The procession passed the little *Café de Parnasse* where, once upon a time, he had met his *Gabrielle*; then the *Café de la Regence*, and whom did he see there? It is hard to believe. There sat his former friend, the traitorous David, busily making a drawing of him (perhaps the drawing in the museum at Lille, Fig. 17). "Lackey!" Danton called to him in

scorn. Next, as the procession passed Robespierre's house, Danton called out, "You will soon follow me! Your house will be torn down, and men will cast salt upon the earth where it stood."

Danton tried to the last to cheer the friends around him — the ordinarily merry Camille Desmoulins who was grieving over his bride, Lucille; the poet Fabre, who affirmed that one of his accusers, who was also a poet, would doubtless steal his unprinted manuscripts and publish them under his own name. "Soon that will no longer worry you," said Danton to him. The executions were quickly under way. The sun was setting, and Danton's giant figure was silhouetted darkly against the evening sky. One of his friends wanted to embrace him but the executioner would not permit it. He wanted to finish his task before sundown. "Idiot," said Danton to him, "Will you be able to prevent our heads from kissing each other in the basket?" For one moment he flinched when he thought of his young wife, "My beloved, shall I never see you again?" Then, with an effort, he exclaimed, "Come Danton, let there be no weakness," and to the executioner, "Show my head to the people. It is worth it." These were his last words.

The curse uttered by Danton as he passed Robespierre's house was fulfilled all too quickly. Before five months were up, Robespierre trod the same path, and the wagon was halted before his house to let the deposed Dictator see the mob in its fury sprinkling his door with the blood of a slaughtered ox.

And now the earth began to tremble under David's feet. He was to the last a devoted adherent of Robespierre. When the latter on the eve of his fall read to the Jacobins his defence which ended with the words, "I am ready to drink the poisoned cup," David cried out "We will drink it with you." He must have been thinking of his portrayal of the death of Socrates, but he probably hardly realized how imminent was the fall of the last great leader of the revolution and how very nearly he himself was involved in that fall.

David, as we know, did not complete his painting of Bara. This was because he was planning for the Convention a festival in honor of the fallen drummer boy. He was a great master in the arrangement of such celebrations. With their carefully designed costumes, massed choirs, improvised statues and profusion of flowers and patriotic orations, they must have been astonishingly impressive, comparable only to the national festivals of the Roman Empire. Unfortunately these artistic manifestations of the revolution, which constituted an appreciable part

of David's life work, were in their nature transitory. David had set the date of the Bara festival for the 10th Thermidor (July 26, 1794). This was the very day of Robespierre's downfall, and his execution took place two days later. Through this coincidence of date—or had David been warned?—he did not attend the sitting of the Convention on the 10th Thermidor. Had he done so, he would undoubtedly have been arrested and guillotined with Robespierre's other adherents.

When he came into the Convention hall three days later he was denounced by André Dumont and obliged to defend himself. He probably believed the end had come. He was no orator, and his defect of speech made things still harder for him. He stood there, pale and fearful, and it is said a nervous perspiration so dewed his forehead that it dripped down his coat to the floor. Where now was the courage with which he had offered to die with Robespierre; with which when Marat was attacked in the Convention he had once exclaimed: "Kill me in his place!" Yes, it was undoubtedly easier to make drawings of one's enemies and former friends on their road to the guillotine than to defend one's life before a tribunal of the people. He made so pitiful an impression that they let him go. Two days later, however, it was thought wiser to arrest him. At first his sentence was light and he was allowed to work, but soon, after another stormy session of the Convention, he was transferred to the Luxembourg. His imprisonment lasted five months. Toward the end, conditions were again made easier and he was allowed to work. Then he was set free, and again, this time at the instigation of his fellow artists, imprisoned for months. Finally during the general amnesty at the end of the year 1795 he again obtained his freedom. This was the end of his political activities. The terrible months of uncertainty during his imprisonment, when death so often stared him in the face, must have been a time of spiritual growth for him, for they resulted in his painting a marvellous series of portraits. His achievement at this time, and during the following years when the revolution slowly ebbed, is the greatest of his artistic career.

There is first of all a portrait depicting the artist at the period of his imprisonment (Fig. 22). It is seldom that a self portrait expresses so vividly the perplexities of a period of terror as do the haunted eyes of this young fanatic. These eyes have been called evil, and David himself described as a good artist but an evil man. The moral equipment of the revolutionaries cannot be summarized in such simple fashion, however. David's political opponents hit nearer the mark when they called him to



FIG. 23. WOMAN OF THE REVOLUTION (1795)

*Museum, Lyon*



FIG. 24. NAPOLEON AS FIRST CONSUL (1797)

*Private Possession, Paris*



the defence of Marat, "What does that prove so far as Marat is concerned? Only the devotion of an honorable man who is allowing himself to be carried away by excitement." That David's political life was so passionate, may be due in part to the youthful violence of his friends. Nearly all the revolutionary leaders were in their early thirties, an age which is apt to be the stormy period of a man's life. Old people do not bring about revolutions. David, to be sure, was forty at the time of its outbreak, but see how youthful he still looked ; and the unspent store of his strength is proved by the great age to which he lived.

He painted another important work during his imprisonment — a little landscape of the Luxembourg Gardens as seen from his window (now in the Louvre), one of the first modern realistic landscapes which seem to foreshadow Courbet's efforts. The eighteenth-century conception of landscape was very different. The landscapes were like theatrical scenery, built up with carefully divided "wings." Here, for the first time, a French artist dared to paint an unpromising bit of earth exactly as he saw it, with all nature's accidental qualities. A garden fence in the middle runs diagonally across the picture, while over in one corner is an avenue of trees which should conventionally have been in the center of the canvas — no planned symmetrical construction, no coulisses in the foreground. Here, too, was a break with tradition — a new beginning.

The two portraits of Monsieur and Madame Seriziat (Figs. 18 and 19), painted by David while he was still under arrest, are particularly illuminating as regards his personality. How could an artist, above whose head the sword of Damocles still hung, paint such sunny and optimistic portraits? We would, in fact, appreciate only one side of David if we think of him always as the stern Roman, never as the light-hearted Frenchman. From the beginning to the end of his artistic career, side by side with his classic compositions and his moving revolutionary portrayals (Fig. 23), he painted a series of charming portraits which prove that through all the horrors of the revolution he never lost his Gallic light-heartedness or his feeling for grace. At the beginning of the series stands the pleasing portrait of Vigée LeBrun, painted in 1793, and at the end, the famous portrait of Madame Recamier painted in 1800. In these works there is still an echo of eighteenth century elegance, a trace of that esprit and glamour which always distinguishes the best of French art. Yet the forms, the simple outlines, the wide empty spaces of the background and the flatness of the treatment is

wholly new. And besides in these portraits we find for the first time representations of the Bourgeoisie which replace those of the aristocracy of the eighteenth century and whose best types became henceforth the patrons of art which in former days the courts had been.

Scarcely a year had passed since David's escape from prison when his freedom was again endangered by the royalist youth who believed that the moment of reaction had arrived. But now there appeared in his studio one day — this was at the end of 1796 — an officer sent by General Bonaparte who asked in his name whether he would accept an offer of safety with his army in Italy. It is evidence of the extraordinary farsightedness of Napoleon that his feelers extended everywhere — wherever there might be future support for his power. But David did not accept the offer: not that he had not at once recognized in Bonaparte his coming greatness — in fact he already called him his "hero" — for David's instinct was in this respect just as unerring as was Bonaparte's — but that he had most likely promised himself, as a result of the terrible experience of the last years, to no longer become embroiled in political affairs. Napoleon's political position was at this time not yet assured, he did not give up the idea of tempting our artist. When he returned from Italy he called at his studio for the first time and wished to be painted. His restless spirit, however, could endure only one sitting. The wonderful sketch which resulted (Fig. 24) is still in existence and proves that Bonaparte knew what he was about when he desired David to become the blazoner of his coming power. No artist has given us from the very beginning so idealized a conception of his personality. The breadth of the design in this unfinished composition; the noble verve of the position; the dauntlessness of expression: everything was in keeping with the great historical style that Napoleon himself might have dreamed of. A few weeks later David received an invitation from Napoleon to accompany him on his Egyptian campaign. Again the artist refused although he had already entirely succumbed to the personality of the great general. When Napoleon returned from Egypt he visited David frequently and flattered him by taking him around Paris and talking over with him his plans for beautifying the city. At the end David fell completely under the influence of the stronger personality, as had happened before in the case of Marat and Robespierre. And in the same degree that Napoleon's personality was more powerful than that of the revolutionaries, his influence was the more crushing. Only in this way can we account for the fact that the one-time revolutionary-champion



FIG. 25. PORTRAIT OF VIGÉE LEBRUN (1793)  
*Museum, Rouen*





FIG. 26. MADAME RECAMIER (1800)

*Louvre, Paris*



FIG. 27. INGRES AS A BOY (c. 1795)

*Private Collection, Paris*



of democratic ideals became at the end the court painter of the emperor. But this was not to the advantage of David's art. So long as Napoleon had not yet reached the height of his power—that is until about 1800—our artist succeeded in producing several imposing compositions in honor of the First Consul, especially the famous portrait on horseback, where he is shown ascending the Alps, symbolically representing his rise to the highest heights of glory—certainly an extraordinary translation of a still living and even young personage into the realm of the ideal and of history. But when Napoleon had become emperor and David his none too carefully treated servant, his art became weaker and weaker from year to year, the while his compositions grew larger in size. When after the downfall of the emperor and the return of the Bourbons he left France in exile and settled in Brussels, where he lived until the year 1824, he still attracted the attention of the world through his many pupils and admirers, though his art now belonged to the past.

David belongs with the few artists who are mentioned not only in the history of art but also in political history—perhaps a doubtful advantage, for preoccupation with two so conflicting fields as art and politics, was only possible through the sacrifice of one or the other. Indeed David as politician lived only in the shadow of the greater ones. In the field of art he was at his best when his political ideas did not tempt him too much toward abstract themes—that is to say, in portraiture, when he had the model before him. As a human being his forte lay in a highly sensitive response to the most intense intellectual and emotional currents of his time. Since, during the greater part of his lifetime, these currents were not primarily of an artistic nature, his art could not always take advantage of them.

This too intense interest in the great events of the day was perhaps his weak point: the fact that he submitted too easily to the ephemeral demands of his contemporaries, preferring the fortune of a successful present to the glory which the future reserves only for the highest aims and the complete renunciation of the demands of the day. From his earliest years David had the critics on his side, and the steady stream of admirers that had gathered about him showed no decrease, remaining with him even in the most dangerous periods of his life. How different did it fare with one of his really great contemporaries—Beethoven—who throughout his life had to contend with uncomprehending critics, but who is quoted as having said in this connection, "Damn me as much

as you like; you are not able to damn me into eternity." Just as to the great ones is given as a recompense for the misunderstanding of their day the consciousness of their own value to the future, so the artist who is glorified in his own time knows his own limitations. David said himself that many of his own works such as the *Brutus* no longer had a living value. It was his bad fortune that he was in too close contact with the affairs of the revolution, for the greatest art (we return here to our introductory remarks) cannot arise in the midst of bloodshed. There can be no doubt of where the unattached and eternal art lay during David's period, when we call to mind the poetry of Goethe or the music of Beethoven. The centers where the greatest poet and the greatest musician of the days of the revolution lived—Weimar and Vienna—were far removed from the theater of the struggle, just as Rembrandt's art flowered outside the scene of the Thirty Years War. From a distance the deafening war clangor permeated into the quiet worlds of these rulers in the realm of art; from a distance through transfiguring light appeared to them the new ideas for which the struggle was waged. Such should be the milieu where the greatest art is born—impregnated with the shower of the newly created ideas, but quietly and not to such a degree that its own existence is imperilled.

This chance for perspective also makes it possible for the really great artist to judge worldly matters more clearly than the one who lives in the midst of the fray. How much more impartially, for instance, did Beethoven, who otherwise did not care for politics, judge the events of the times than David, who worried about them half his lifetime! Beethoven, also, like the best of his contemporaries, was democratically inclined and applauded the new revolutionary ideas. When Napoleon became First Consul he recognized his greatness and desired to celebrate in his music the hero who had brought the revolution to completion. He began his great symphony, the "Eroica," and wrote upon the title page the name of Bonaparte next to his own. When the news was brought to him that Napoleon had crowned himself emperor, indignant that his illusions had been dispelled and that Bonaparte had become as tyrannical as the crowned heads which the revolution had deposed, he tore up the dedication and began the symphony anew, ending it with the funeral march.

The fascination of the art and the personality of David lies in the fact that they reflect the period of the greatest intellectual and social upheaval of his nation—an upheaval such as comes to every nation once

in its history, with such a force that through it the whole world is shaken. In such moments of history creations of centuries collapse at one blow. The foundations of faith and of morals waver; the ties of family and friendship are torn apart and even the customary tasks of the day, under other circumstances serving as an anchor alike to the weak and the strong, appear useless and cease: like the flood of the terrific storm which engulfs us, rudely tearing away from the strongest the guiding of their own fate, and forcing the slothful into the maelstrom of the higher general will. What remains for the individual who, hesitating, stands at the edge of the precipice, viewing the tragic drama? Can he do better than to plunge into the stream, keeping afloat as best he may?

Happy the one who in such periods succeeds like our artist in preserving so much of his own identity that from out the history of this chaos his name still rings with vibrant life.

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